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Cruz departure a symptom of a rebel cause in disarray

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WASHINGTON — During his two years as a Nicaraguan contra leader, Arturo Cruz was the symbol of the Reagan administration's efforts to transform a CIA-created mercenary force into a genuine movement of national liberation.

His resignation Monday not only underlines the failure of those efforts, but also emphasizes the disarray within the contra movement itself, according to academics, politicians and activists of varying ideologies who were interviewed yesterday.

Cruz was instrumental in persuading Congress to vote \$127 million in contra funding during the last two years, including \$100 million in military aid. And even congressional Republicans warned yesterday that his departure might doom any additional assistance.

Further, Cruz — hobbled by resistance from rival rebel leaders and from the CIA and American conservatives — proved unable to put into practice the reforms he preached: greater pluralism and the creation of a political infrastructure, as well as a military one.

So his withdrawal marks yet another in the Reagan administration's long list of failures to broaden support for the rebels, both in the region and around the world.

"This administration has burned many bridges in Nicaragua," said Richard Millett, a prominent Nicaragua specialist, referring to its international search for contra aid.

"They've burned the Israelis, they've burned the Saudis, they've burned Brunei. And now they've burned Arturo. This is political pyromania," said Millett, who teaches history at Southern Illinois University.

With Cruz's resignation, two of the top three contra leaders have resigned in three weeks — just as seven of the top U.S. policymakers guiding the rebel program have resigned during the last four months.

"I think the disarray in the contra movement reflects the disarray in the Reagan administration," said Richard Viguerie, an influential conservative.

For his part, Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs and the administration's

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point man for the contra program, downplayed Cruz's resignation, saying that "new leaders will appear to replace" him.

But last month, he had said of Cruz, "I think it's fair to say that nobody's irreplaceable, but he comes as close as you can get."

In Washington, Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole (R., Kan.) said he told Reagan that "the American people have ever fully understood what our purpose was" in Nicaragua. "We need to better articulate ... the mission of the contras," he said he told Reagan.

The men who had that sense of mission are mostly gone, casualties of the Iran-Contra scandal. Oliver North, former aide on the National Security Council, was fired; the former national security adviser, John Poindexter, and Nestor Sanchez, the Defense Department's top Central American planner, resigned, and CIA Director William Casey was felled by a brain tumor.

Of those who first recruited Cruz in 1985, only two ranking U.S. officials — Abrams and the chief of the CIA Nicaragua Task Force, Alan Fiers — remain.

At the time of Cruz's recruitment, the contras were an army encamped in Honduras with a dismal human rights record and little political credibility with moderates in Washington. They were led by a seven-person directorate headed by Adolfo Calero, a former Coca-Cola bottling plant manager in Managua.

U.S. officials saw Cruz, and to a lesser extent Alfonso Robelo — both former members of the Sandinista junta — as Nicaraguan versions of Salvadoran President Jose Napoleon Duarte, who had backslapped Congress into approving unprecedented levels of aid to El Salvador.

U.S. officials wedded Cruz, Robelo and Calero into a triumvirate known as the United Nicaraguan Opposition. And on one level, the strategy paid off. Cruz persuaded Congress to vote \$27 million in humanitarian aid in 1985 and \$100 million in military aid last year.

But Cruz's vision was always larger than that of his American allies. He gathered an influential group of liberals that included human rights ac-

tivist Bruce Cameron, Latin American specialist Robert Leiken and his own son, Arturo Jr., a scholar at Johns Hopkins University.

They not only lobbied Congress, but also wrote in intellectual journals, seeking to forge a lasting constituency for the contras. The title of an unpublished article written by Cameron last year summed up their vision: "From a proxy force to a national liberation movement."

Cameron argued that civilians needed to control the movement's finances and imbue its military officers with a democratic, revolutionary vision for Nicaragua. But Calero and his allies said Cruz's vision was too socialistic.

There was infighting within the administration as well, with the CIA backing Calero and the State Department embracing Cruz. It climaxed last month when Cruz and Robelo, with State Department support, forced Calero out of the leadership.

Then, hours later, the CIA authorized Cruz's rivals to leak damaging details of payments he had received from North, contra sources said. The CIA refused to comment yesterday.

Millett said he doubted that Cruz's vision of reform ever had a chance.

"This was just wishful thinking," he said yesterday. "Guerrilla wars don't tend to get purer. They tend to get nastier."